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Written on JANUARY 26, 2015 AT 12:12 PM by SVANDERWERFF

Naval Hospital Bremerton staff members share their 'Unwavering Strength' for a New Year, New You, Pt. I

Filed under MILITARY MEDICINE, NAVY HISTORY, U.S. NAVY

{NO COMMENTS}

By Douglas H. Stutz, Naval Hospital Bremerton Public Affairs



Silke Nied Sookbirsingh and Willie Tart shared their stories of overcoming odds and weathering hardships in the best-selling inspirational book 'Unwavering Strength.'

One risked everything – including death – to escape to freedom. One faced multiple ordeals – including loss – overcoming each with strong faith. As Navy Medicine focuses on the theme of a 'New Year and New You,' there are two staff members at Naval Hospital Bremerton (NHB) who have gone above and beyond to share their stories on such a premise.

Silke Nied Sookbirsingh, certified medical assistant with 4/OB clinic and Willie Tart, Information Management Department electronic health records trainer, have shared their stories of overcoming odds and weathering hardships in the best-selling inspirational book 'Unwavering Strength.'

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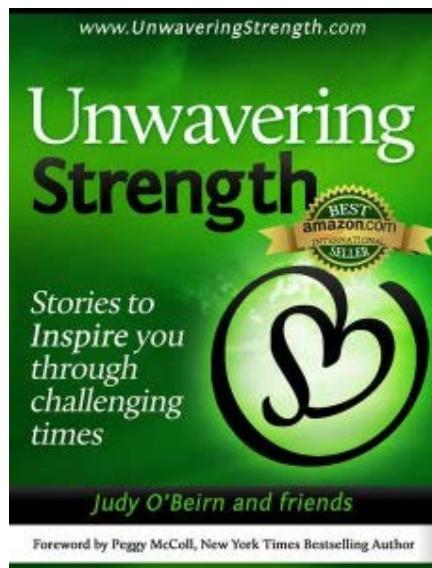
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The book was released Oct. 3, 2014, in Toronto Canada. Sookbirsingh, who went by just her maiden name Nied in the book, and Tart are featured with 30 other authors. Each author focuses on how they dealt with adversity by finding inner strength. From death to daring defections, these stories take readers through the author's experiences and the sorrow, hurt, and tragedy associated with each. Nied found out about the upcoming book from Tart and her harrowing chronicle is told in the chapter, 'Escape from Behind the Iron Curtain.'



Silke Nied Sookbirsingh is a certified medical assistant with 4/OB clinic.

"There are a few people here at NHB who knew my story, but there are a lot of others who did not and are now interested," said Nied, who made it back to Toronto for the release and associated book signing. If there is one central theme or message from Nied's story, it's 'never to take freedom for granted.'

Phrases like the 'Cold War' and the 'Iron Curtain' might be a generation removed, but for Nied who grew up in East Germany, the words form a legacy of liberty denied before freedom was found. The release date of 'Unwavering Strength' coincidentally falls on the same date as the official reunification of Germany. The Berlin Wall came down in Nov. 9, 1989. That seminal moment marked the end of communist rule for many. But during the 45 years of the deadly divide between east and west, countless German's had tried – in vain – to escape.

Although no concise figure is known, hundreds of people died seeking their freedom and countless more suffered during that time. The barbed wire, machine gun, and land mines took a deadly physical and psychological toll. "The Berlin Wall was built officially to keep the enemy out, but everyone there knew it was to keep the East Germans in," said Nied. Several groups note that more than 1,100 people died trying to escape the heavily fortified and mined former East-West German border between 1961 and 1989. In addition, according to the

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Potsdam Centre for Historical Research, an estimated 100,000 people were also imprisoned in East Germany for trying to flee to the West.



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“Nevertheless, many people tried to escape,” Nied said. “Some were successful. Some paid with their lives. Never in my wildest dreams did I think my parents would ever risk our lives. Why would they want to start over at their age? The answer was simple; Freedom!” It was during a summer vacation in Bulgaria and Romania that the actual idea of committing to a family exodus to the West was solidified. At a camp ground one evening, Silke’s Uncle Dietmar from West Germany made a surprise appearance. Plans were discussed of actually trying to make a run for it, or in their case, a swim for it across the River Danube. But it was easier to talk about than make happen. Any short span across the river wouldn’t work even at night due to a full moon, making it impossible to elude border guards. They next tried to find a suitable place in Hungary to swim across, but found they couldn’t even get close to shore without getting shot. Discouraged, but not defeated, they drove back home and commenced to plan the next attempt. “We knew we had to train to swim at least three kilometers (approx. 1.86 miles) across the river,” said Nied. Necessary precautions would have to be taken against the elements. They also needed to ensure that all the required personal credentials were protected and would make it across the border. In a scene straight out of a Cold War spy movie, important family papers were passed between Silke’s father Ulrich and her uncle at an autobahn rest stop, with her father placing them in one of the stalls and then the uncle going in to retrieve them. But the hardest part of waiting was to keep the family intentions a secret.



A common practice of the border patrol was to shoot first and maybe ask questions later.

“I couldn’t tell anyone about our plans,” related Nied. “Not to my best friend, not even to my grandparents. One word overheard and my parents would have been arrested and sent to

prison for at least 12 years and I would have been placed in an orphanage.” On July 19, 1979, after the several aborted attempts, numerous sleepless nights, and anxious days filled with trepidation, Silke and her family set out for the small Romanian town of Orsovo near the Danube. Their plan was to swim across the bay there to Yugoslavia and Uncle Dietmar, who would then whisk them to West Germany and freedom.

A common practice of the border patrol was to shoot first and maybe ask questions later. Bodies were commonly left where they fell, as a none-too-gentle reminder to all on the perils of trying to flee. “Needless to say, I was scared to death,” Nied remembered. “I wasn’t so sure anymore that I wanted to be free. But after a while I settled down.” Their plan called for more subterfuge. Uncle Dietmar registered in the only hotel available to western tourists, and obtained a room overlooking the portion of the bay they planned to swim across. He was to stand outside his well-lit room on the balcony, and raise his arms to his side if the coast was clear.



Silke and her family set out for the small Romanian town of Orsovo near the Danube. Their plan was to swim across the bay there to Yugoslavia

With the fall of darkness, their uncle sent the signal and the time came. Despite a daylight temperature in the 90s, the evening chill added to the cold of the Danube. As they glided into the water, adrenalin provided fuel for their freedom. “Everything was so quiet, almost eerie and so unreal,” said Nied.

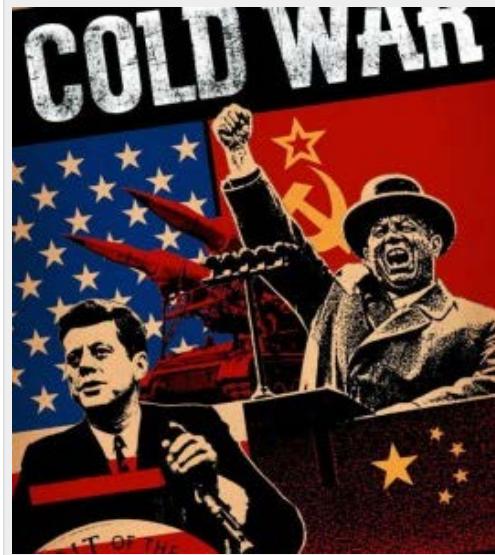
The lights behind them on the Romanian side grew smaller as they made their way to the shore of Yugoslavia, looking for one red light and one green light, the standard maritime signal markers for ships plying up and down the river. “We could feel our wet clothes getting heavier and heavier,” Nied recalled. Half way across, a Romanian patrol boat flashed on their search lights. Silke and her parents dove several times to avoid being caught in the glare as it passed over the river. Just as that nautical problem was handled, another rose. Instead of one red light and one green, there was two of each, with one set of lights moving. “It was a ship. Something no one had thought of,” said Nied. “It could have been our death if we swam towards it and got caught in the propeller or ran over.”

Just as it seemed Silke had no strength left to make it, she felt her mother Ingrid drag her the final few meters to the other side. They had made it across. Right into handcuffs by patrolling Yugoslavian border guards. For almost two weeks, they were kept under watch by the local police and constantly questioned as their uncle frantically searched the area for them, fearing the worst had happened. They were then transferred to the Yugoslavian capital of Belgrade where diplomatic intervention had them finally at the West German embassy, but not before ensuring it wasn’t an East German ruse. The emotions of the moment took over. “Mom and dad started crying and I couldn’t understand why,” she said. “But I then realized that we were

free. We were on West German soil.”

In the meantime, Uncle Dietmar was still driving up and down the Danube trying to find any clue as to their whereabouts. “He spent two weeks trying to find us before he returned home empty handed,” Nied said.

Eventually he told family that they were lost, presumably forever. Three more Cold War casualties caught by the Iron Curtain.



Never take freedom for granted. It can be taken away in an instant.

But when Silke and her parents reached Frankfurt, her mother phoned ahead to let their family know they were coming. “My aunt was somewhat shocked, confused and ecstatic at the same time,” recalled Nied. “She then called my uncle and told him we were okay. He couldn’t believe it at first. Then he helped to bring out the champagne to celebrate.”

“I related my story to my children so they never take freedom for granted. It can be taken away in an instant. I will forever be grateful to my parents that they had the courage to be free,” Nied said.

To be continued....

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Written on JANUARY 27, 2015 AT 6:00 AM by SVANDERWERFF

Naval Hospital Bremerton staff members share their 'Unwavering Strength' for a New Year, New You, Pt. II

Filed under COMMUNITY SUPPORT, FAMILIES, SUICIDE PREVENTION

{NO COMMENTS}

By Douglas H Stutz, Naval Hospital Bremerton Public Affairs



Tart has been able to work through life's challenges is with what he calls, 'true 'GRITT,' an acronym for 'Godly Resolve in Troubled Times.'

Tart was the actual architect of their involvement in the book.

He was the one who initially found out that the book's publisher, Judy O'Beirn, were looking for true, inspirational stories and was told by friends that he needed to get in touch with the publisher. After he contacted the publisher and gave a brief synopsis, she called back intrigued and asked him to send his story.

"After she read it she asked if she could use it and I said absolutely. She said, 'you need to be in the book,' and explained how the proceeds would go to help families deal with cancer. I was glad to contribute to help others. There was a divine purpose in being a published author. I always wanted to do it. My church and my family noted the potential," said Tart.

Tart attests that his goal sharing his story is that even though unfortunate things sometimes happen, people have a choice in how they deal with them. It can take a lot longer at times to deal

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Tart attests that his goal sharing his story is that even though unfortunate things sometimes happen, people have a choice in how they deal with them.

"show others they can make it," Tart said, explaining that traumatic events can happen to when least expected and are not just confined to combat scenarios.

Taft deals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He wakes up every day with it. He labels it the elephant in the room and used to have the perception that PTSD was just from hand-to-hand combat. Extreme emotional trauma is known to happen almost anywhere to anyone at anytime.

"But I refuse to be defined by it. Some days are easier than others. Others see you but don't know what you battle. Overcoming that is one of the biggest challenges," explained Tart, citing that what has helped him handle PTSD is his faith and love for family, as well as the positive and inspirational help that has reinforced his personal convictions and enabled him to help others cope with difficult life issues.

Tart's chapter, 'Matters of My Heart: True GRITT' has him explaining how he has been able to work through life's challenges is with what he calls, 'true 'GRITT,' an acronym for 'Godly Resolve in Troubled Times.'

A Laurinburg, N. C. native, preacher's son and 20-year Air Force veteran, Tart was taught how to find strength in troubling times marked with failure, sickness, sadness, and death by resorting to GRITT.

"I encourage anyone that if they have an issue to confront that issue and not just skim it."

If what you're doing isn't working, I strongly support seeking others to help – pastoral care, social workers, counseling with mental health – It takes someone strong to step back and admit there's a better way to handle things and check their pulse, pause to reflect and assess feelings," said Tart, adding that he considers himself a little more transparent now.

with a situation that is mentally, emotionally and physically draining.

"How we choose to handle ourselves when bad things happen is something we need to deal with. It can make us have bad habits and impact our family or we can get good habits and make positive changes and

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“I encourage anyone that if they have an issue to confront that issue and not just skim it.”

“I didn’t believe in opening up and sharing, especially with a counselor. Sometimes people put themselves in a box and only allow certain others to help them. I refuse to restructure myself like that as I am committed to personal growth process and also helping others,” continued Tart.

Tart focused most of his story on dealing with three significant issues concerning loved ones. He has had to struggle to come to grips with health emergencies of his wife, a life-threatening condition with his father, and the huge spiritual and emotional challenge of losing his son.

“Jaquan was just 25 years old and struggled with kidney disease. I really didn’t know something could hurt so badly when he passed away. But the message I have learned is that when hurting, we have to heal ourselves and pick ourselves up and not let that hurt keep us down. We can’t let that hurt linger, especially when we’re vulnerable. There is strength in survival,” related Tart.

The reviews of the release have been favorable. Nied notes that the book has been a best seller in six countries. It has also sold out of a national book outlet on the Seattle side.

“It’s amazing. My wife and mom cried reading the stories. I do feel blessed by being in this book. This is a whole other level. There has been so much support, it has blown me away. Even before I actually saw a copy, Capt. Thecly Scott (Director for Surgical Services) came up one day and said, ‘I need you to sign my book,’ ” Tart said.

“I had always wished to be able to do something like this but never thought it would happen and then take off like it has. My family is very excited,” added Nied.

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